

Puerperal Fever #1



No 67.

An Essay  
on Puerperal Fever

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Those diseases to which women, are  
peculiarly subject, form so considerable and important  
a portion of the practice of a physician & those  
especially connected with pregnancy, are so very  
interesting to him that they have particularly  
drawn the attention of medical men to the means  
most proper to alleviate them. The duty im-  
posed on them by their creator for the continua-  
tion of mankind subjects them to more than  
an equal share of the miseries that afflict

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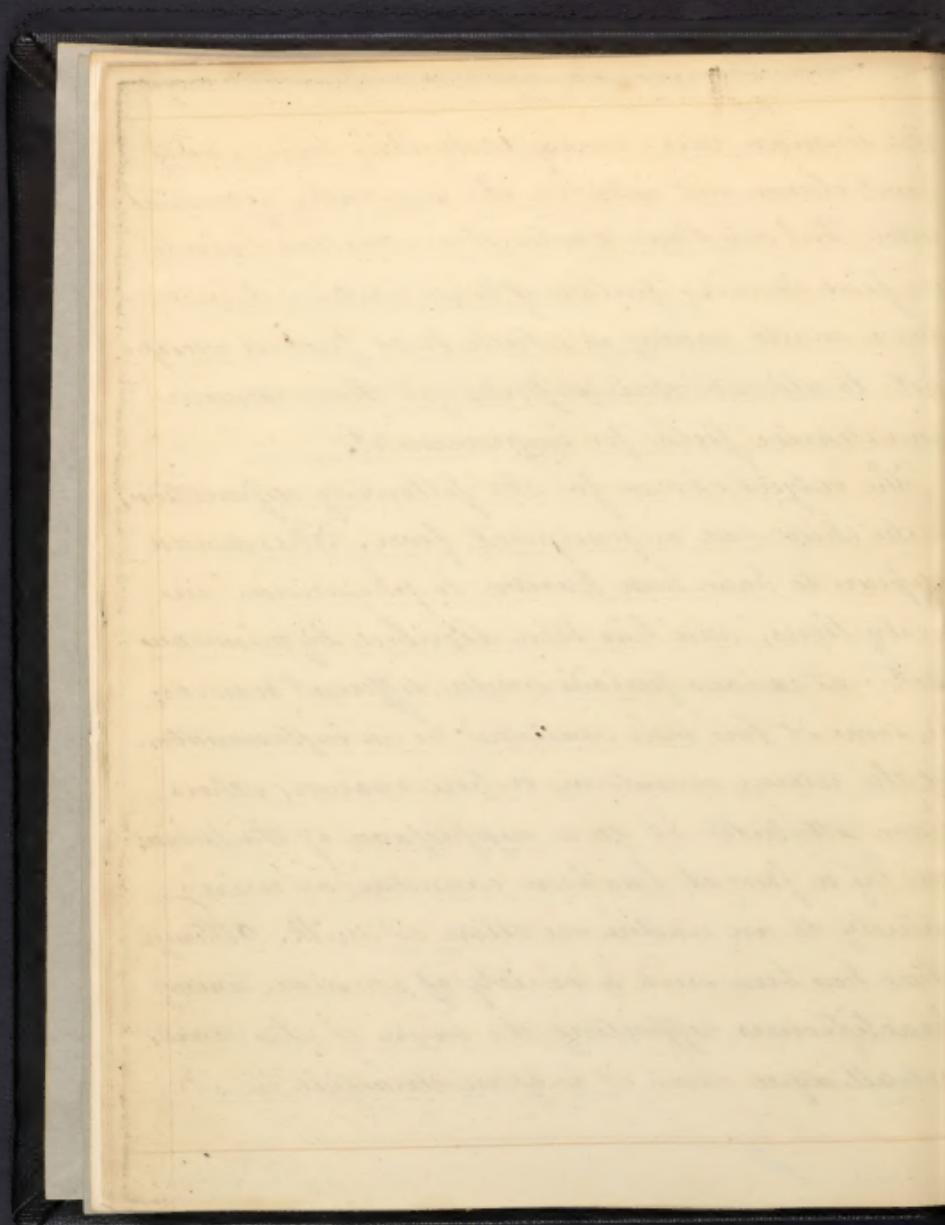
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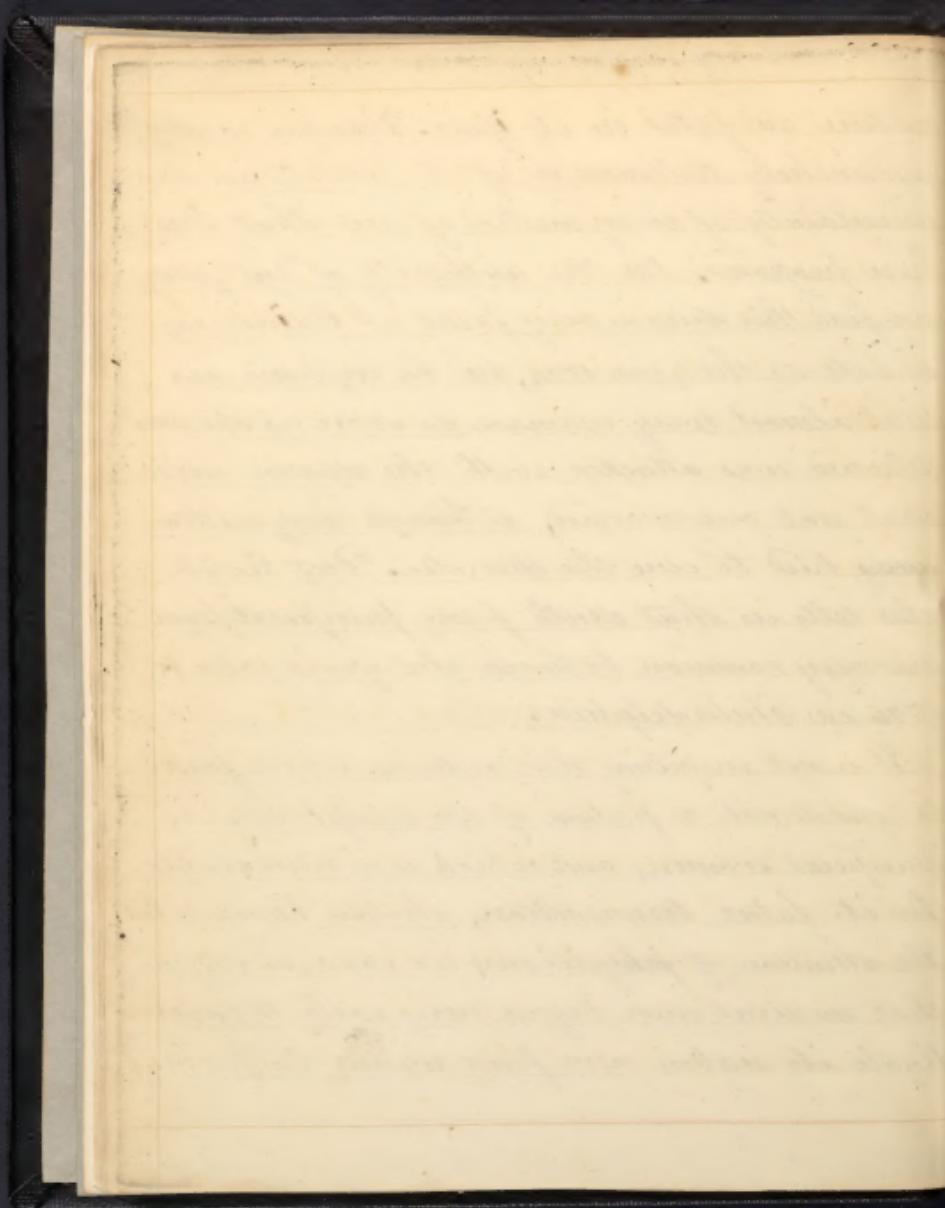
the human race; consequently they have a very great claim not only on the sympathy of medical men but on their particular attention; since we find in every period of time exertions have been made many of which have proved successful to alleviate their distress: yet there remains an extensive field for improvement.

The subject chosen for the following dissertation, is the child-bed or puerperal fever. This disease appears to have been known to physicians in early times, and has been described by numerous writers at various periods under different names; by some it has been considered as an inflammation of the uterus, omentum or peritoneum; others have attributed it to a suppession of the lochia; and by a few it has been considered as owing entirely to an undue secretion of milk. Although there has been such a variety of opinion among practitioners respecting the cause of this disease, yet all agree that it is often dreadful in its



nature and fatal in its issue. There are many melancholy testimonies of its fatality and the uncertainty of every method of cure that has been proposed. On the authority of Doct. Young we find this disease very fatal at Edinburgh as late as the year 1774, and he informs us that almost every woman as soon as she was delivered was attacked with the disease and that not one recovered, although every method was tried to cure the disorder. Doct. Rush also tells us that death from puerperal fever was very common between the years 1760 & 1776 in Philadelphia.

It is not surprising that a disease which forms so considerable a portion of the complaints of puerperal women, and which is so remarkable for its fatal termination, should have excited the attention of physicians; we consequently find that medical men began very early to investigate its nature and find means to prevent

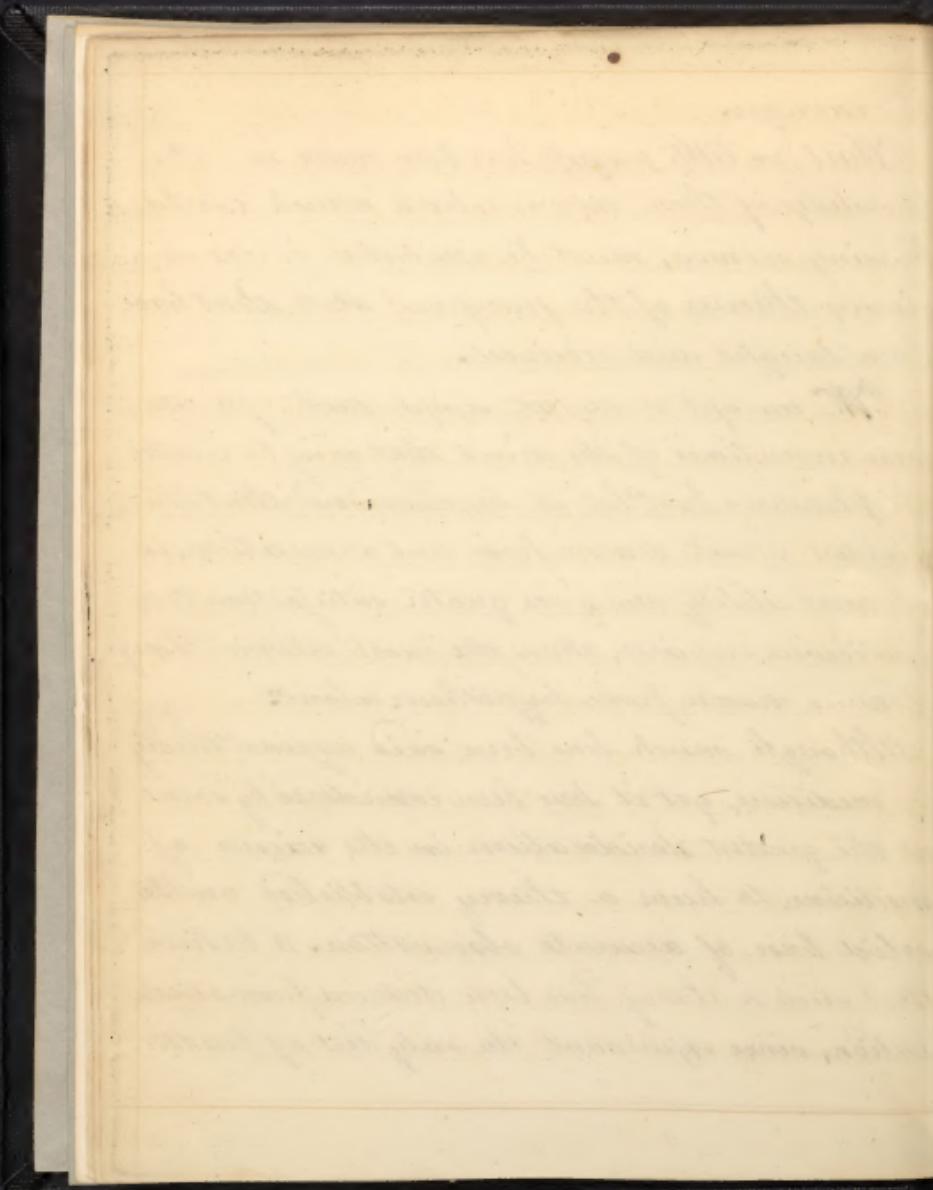


its ravages.

That so little progress has been made in the knowledge of those diseases which attack child bearing women, must be attributed to the imaginary theories of the puerperal state that have been taught and received.

We are apt to neglect simple truth for the mere inventions of the mind that may be created at pleasure: but "let it be remembered that the slightest remark drawn from real observation, is of more utility and gives greater satisfaction to a judicious enquirer, than the most extensive theory of causes drawn from hypothesis alone."

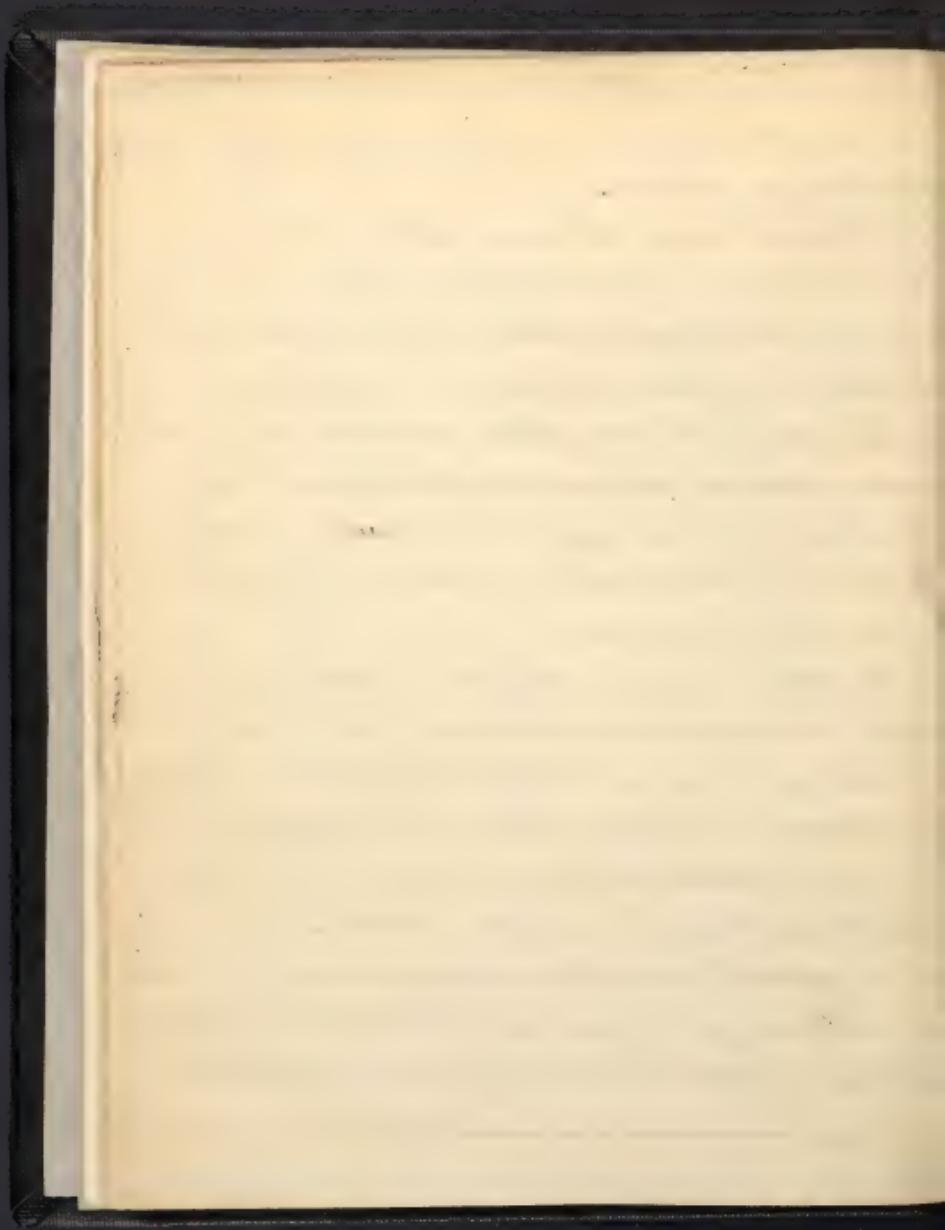
Although much has been said against theory in medicine, yet it has been considered by some as the greatest desideratum in the science of medicine, to have a theory established on the solid base of accurate observation. I believe that such a theory has been deduced from observation, since experiment the only test of truth



has taught us that it leads to a successful treatment of disease.

The theory of astringents, teaches that disease consists in a morbid or injurious action of the system, in that the injurious action by the variation in it, from the sufficiency of its seat, and the greater or less time of its duration, produces all the numerous diseases incident to the body. It rejects the idea of pursuing for the mere removal of a disease, and confines the attention of the physician to the state of the system.

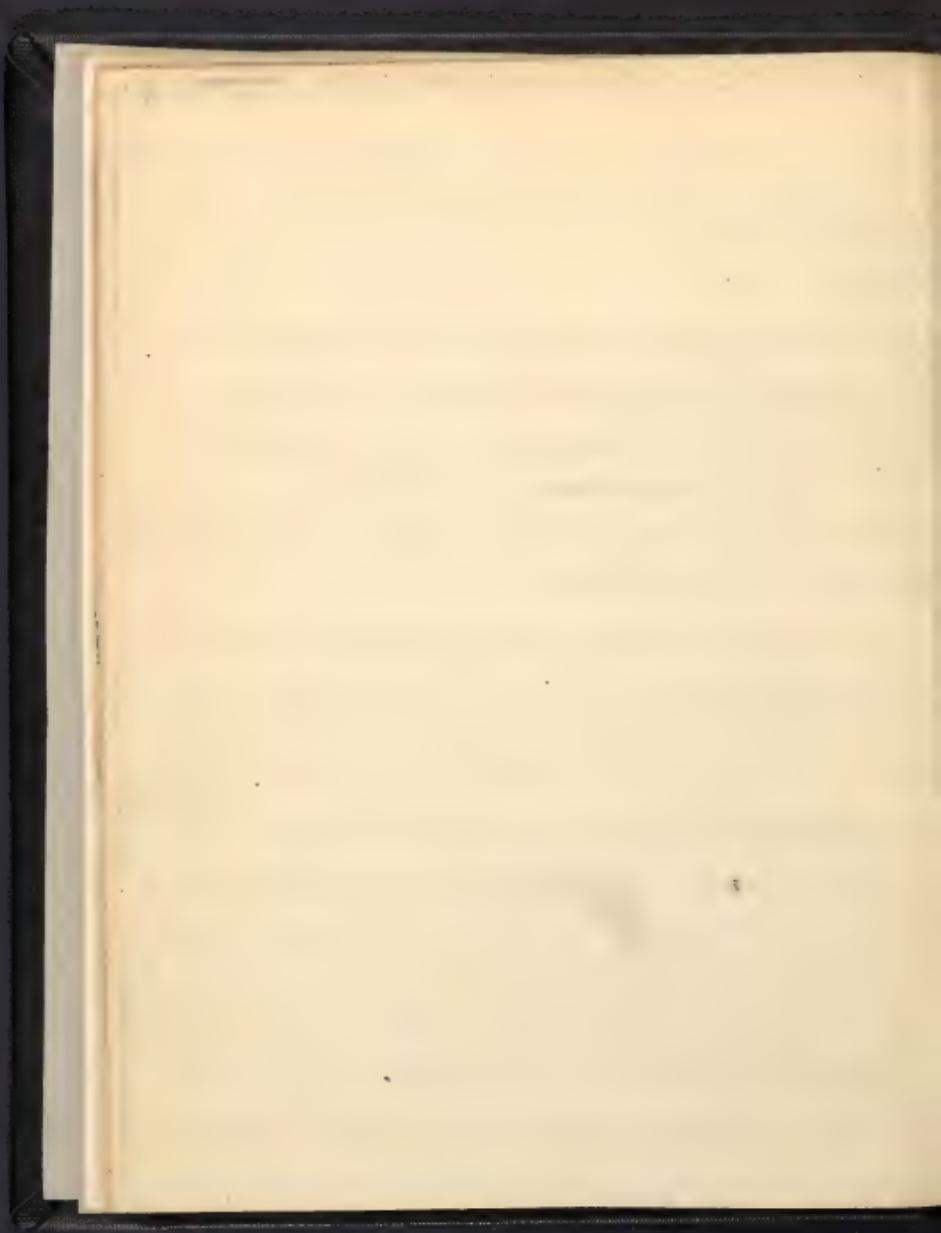
History. This is no subject in medicine, except, concerning which, there has been a greater diversity of opinion than any other, though the greatest number of writers it is considered as of a low, putrid nature; by others as highly inflammatory; by our own countrymen it is generally considered as a disease of insidious action, but frequently the inflammatory action passes into the typhus state, which



may be known by the pulse becoming frequent,  
small and quick, a great inclination to sleep,  
clammy sweat, torpor of the alimentary canal,  
& humor.

The period of time at which this disease attacks  
the patient, is very uncertain, sometimes she  
is free from all symptoms of the disease for  
a week after parturition; but the most fre-  
quent time of attack, is on the second or third  
day after that event.

It almost always comes on with a first  
stage, uninfused with the usual signs of  
fever, as great thirst, pain in the loins & gener-  
ally over the upper parts. The skin is hot and dry,  
sometimes partially moist. The tongue at  
first, is furred and white, but becomes cov-  
ered with a dark coat. The pulse rapid, some-  
times small, at others full and tame, more gene-  
rally very frequent from 100 to 120. Sweating  
is violent, is left in the body, with great ex-  
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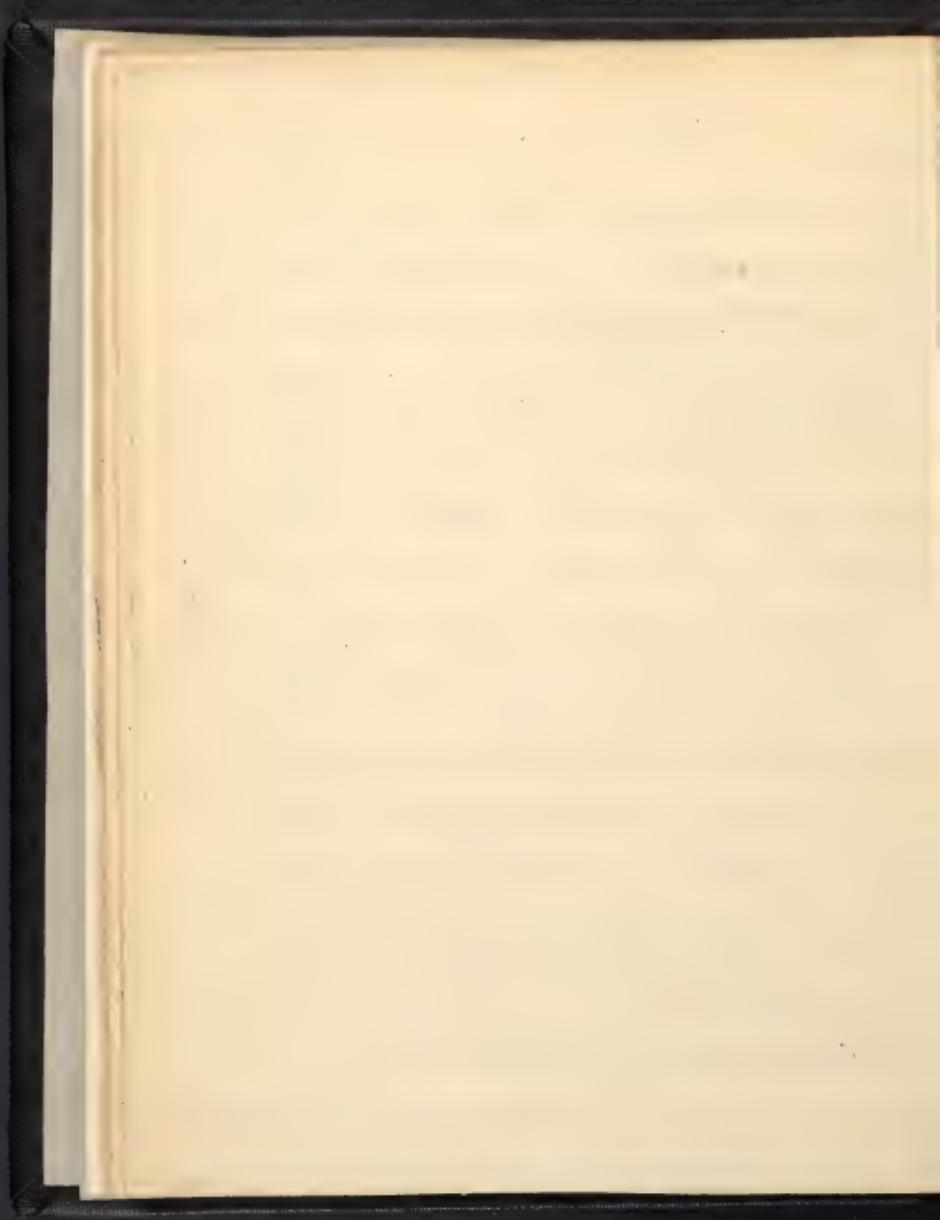


by an effusion.

As the disease advances the whole abdomen becomes affected with excreting pain, and so extremely sore be the touch, that even the bed clothes by their weight cause great distress; and at the same time a swelling generally commences which sometimes increases so rapidly that in a very short time the woman appears as large as before delivery.

Prolongation is performed with great difficulty, the mother being often in laborious from compression of the diaphragm. There is likewise much pain in the back, hips and lower extremities, in swollen legs, &c. & constipation.

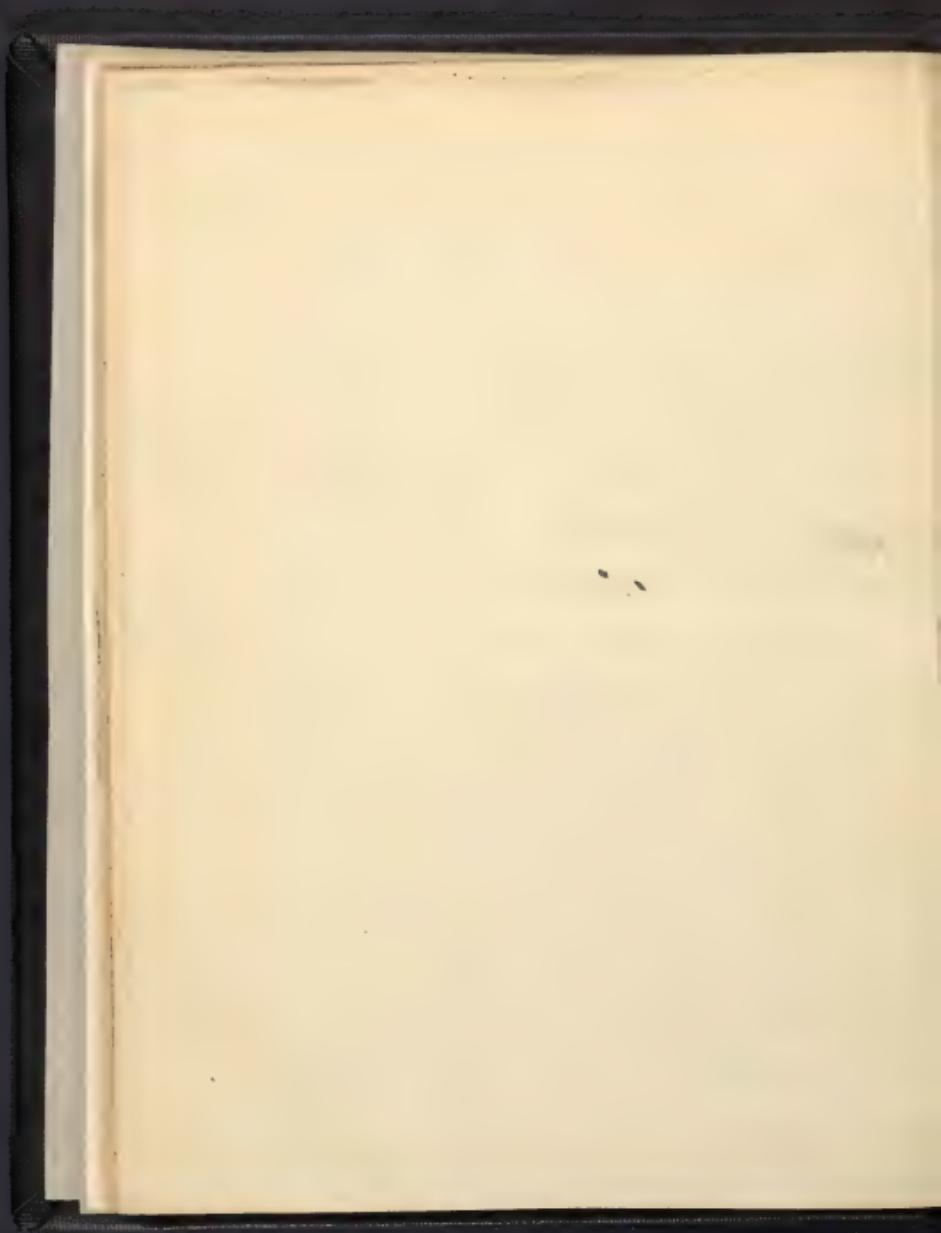
The face is sometimes flushed, but generally pale, and there are often eruptions; and in action either see nothing both of body or mind, and prolation of strength, the womb of itself, with many involuntary motions about her loins, and no desire to trouble it.



it is indeed terrible. The delirium  
is true & more violent & longer continued  
as in the former instance, & it is a bad sign  
indeed as a long delirium. The patient  
will make some head, though not the earliest  
at the commencement, but as the disease goes on  
as a delirious fever; the state always  
will grow worse & worse.

First delirium seldom happens, but when  
the fever has almost worn out & given  
way, when the faculties of the mind become  
decayed. The patient is much disturbed in  
sleep & without any distinct dreams, or  
thoughts in great variety.

If the delirium  
attacks the patient before the fever becomes  
more to the heat, it seldom occurs; but if  
it has been protracted, it is seldom suppressed,  
but is usually confined in uncertainty, un-



much altered in taste and colour.

The Sputum are  
seldom sufficient but as the disease progresses  
becomes much altered in quality and quantity.

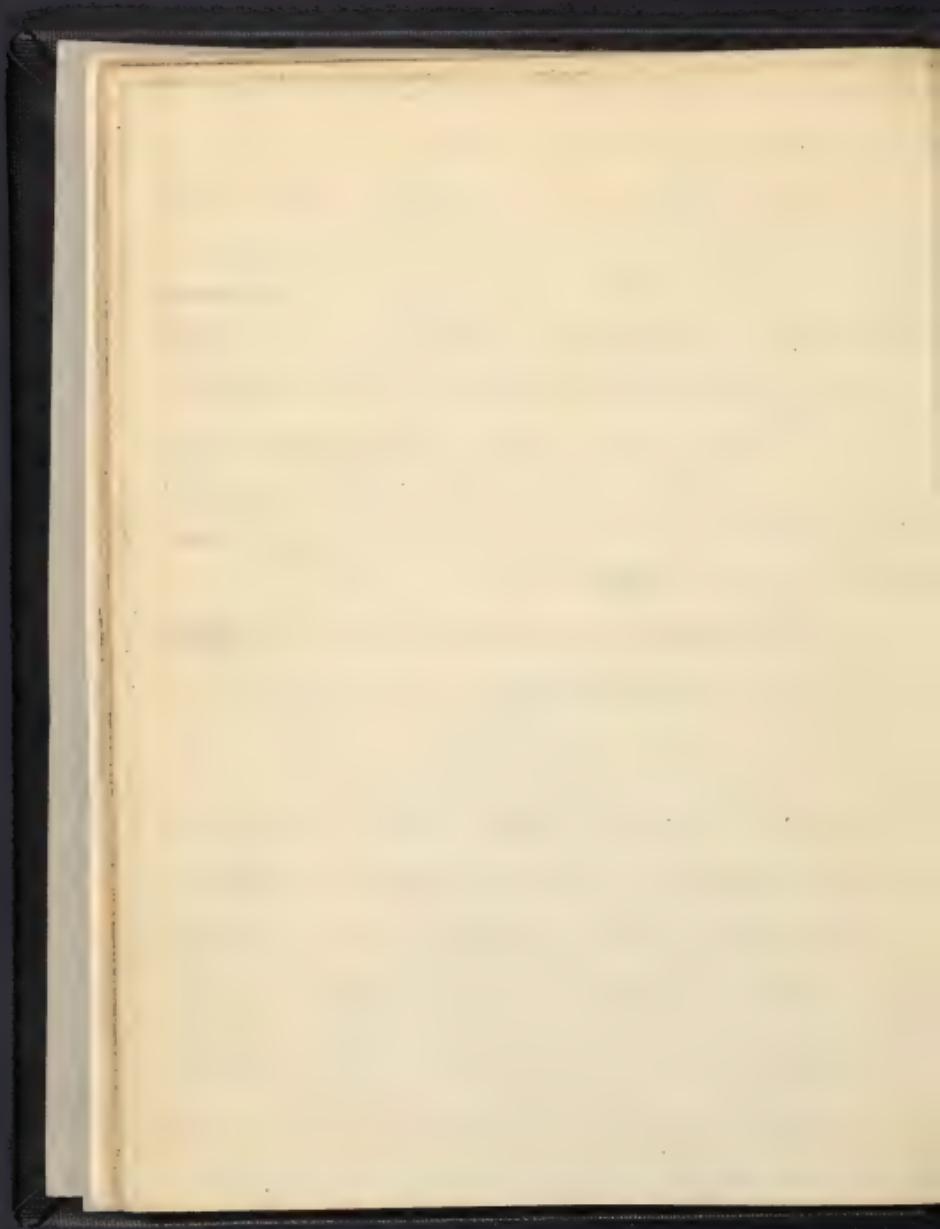
The urine is small in quantity, is excreted  
frequently with great pain, and is very coloured.

Blood drawn from a vein has different  
appearances, depending on the violence of the  
disease. Doctor Keck found it always zigzag; and  
sometimes it is diffuse.

The patient generally loses his app-  
petite at the commencement of the disease.

In sleep the eyes are half closed, and the  
mouth remains generally open.

The pulse now sinks; the hands become  
cold and clammy; the lips, teeth, and tongue,  
are covered with a thick crust; a few hairs  
of which cover the whole internal surface of the  
mouth are scarcely discerning, most of which;  
are crusty discharges of feces; cold and moisture-



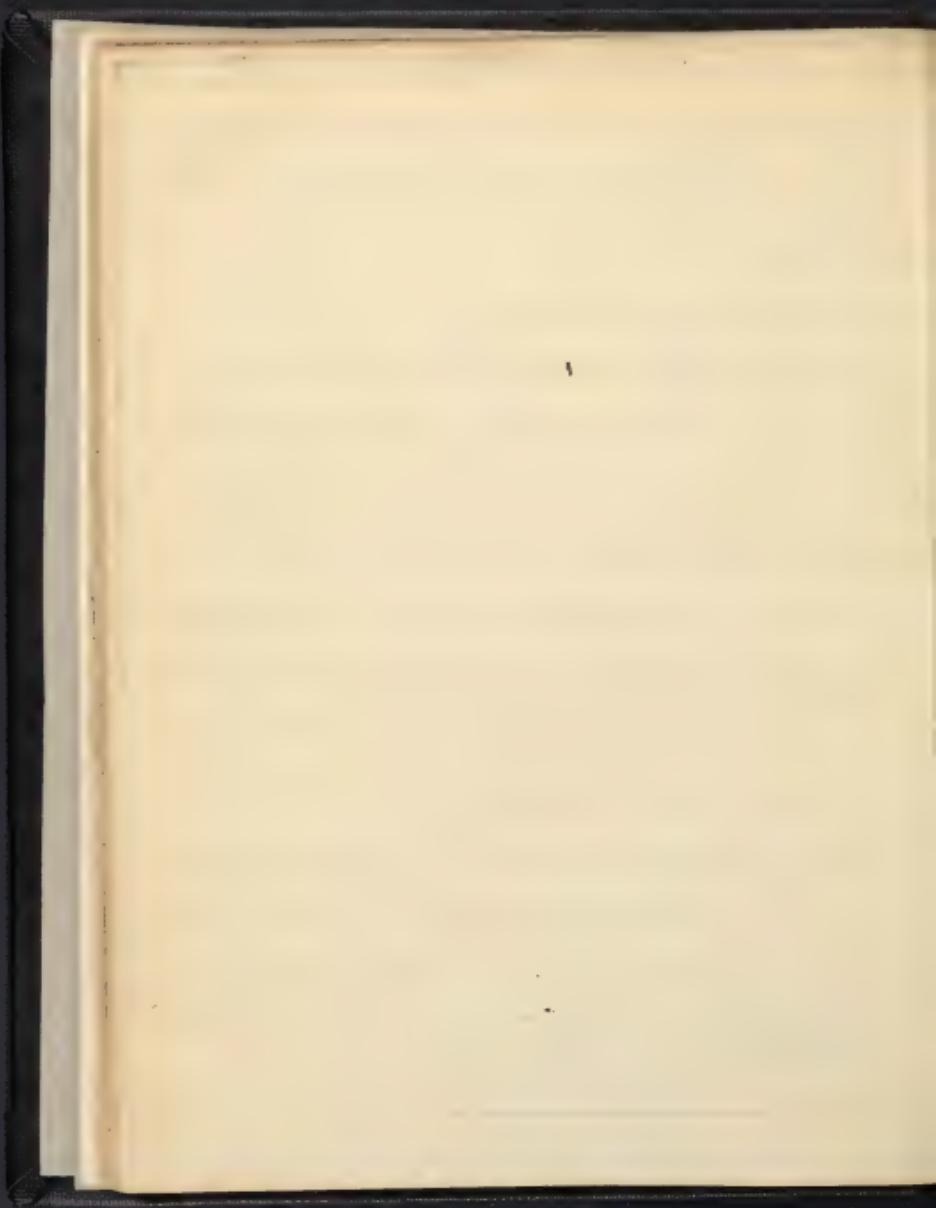
convulsions over the body, down the abdomen however.

Such is the course of the first paroxysm; although it may be said according to the constitution of the patient, the state of vice or, on the other extreme, a later attack of the disease.

Second Paroxysm generally terminates in a short time, if no abscess is offering, but it is very rare that we have of those who are attacked with it, lie on the field, i.e. This are our however in which death does not occur until the nineteenth day; and in others again as the noon day after he attacks at the disease.

If the second terminates favourably, the recovery will be soon to come, in the present case great care and attention.

The symptom considered as favourable to life are the re-appearance of the latitude when it has been suppressed, the gradual subsidence of the swelling in wreath of the abdomen, with a moist skin.

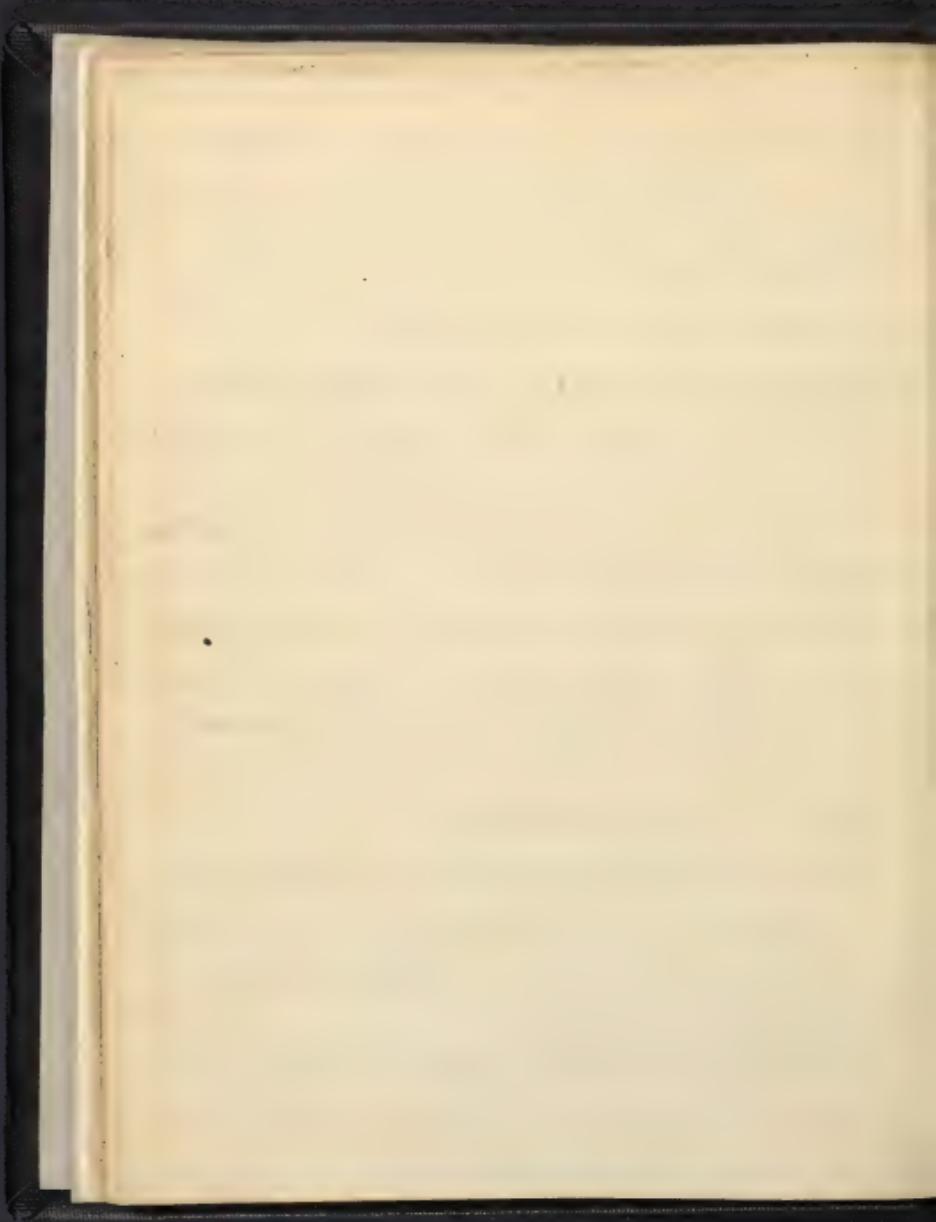


## Remote and Predisposing Causes.

The remote causes of the disease, are divided into  
a primary debility, in the system, or more exactly  
in the uterus; secondly, the debility is the auto-  
predisposing cause. First debility is the first  
cause which may be inferred, 1<sup>st</sup> from the disease  
sticking the patient wholly, after you will see,  
when the system has been stimulated by the  
various humours; 2<sup>d</sup> from it attacking those  
from whom, naturally, who are so weak, like  
old men, make an consideration; 3<sup>rd</sup> from it being  
very frequent in those who are subject to violent  
impulses at the womb; and 4<sup>th</sup> by it generally  
attacking the patient in the evening, when  
the body is most wearied.

The remote causes may be divided into  
that in general; the local, and another  
thirdly, and the several indirectly through the  
medium of the system.

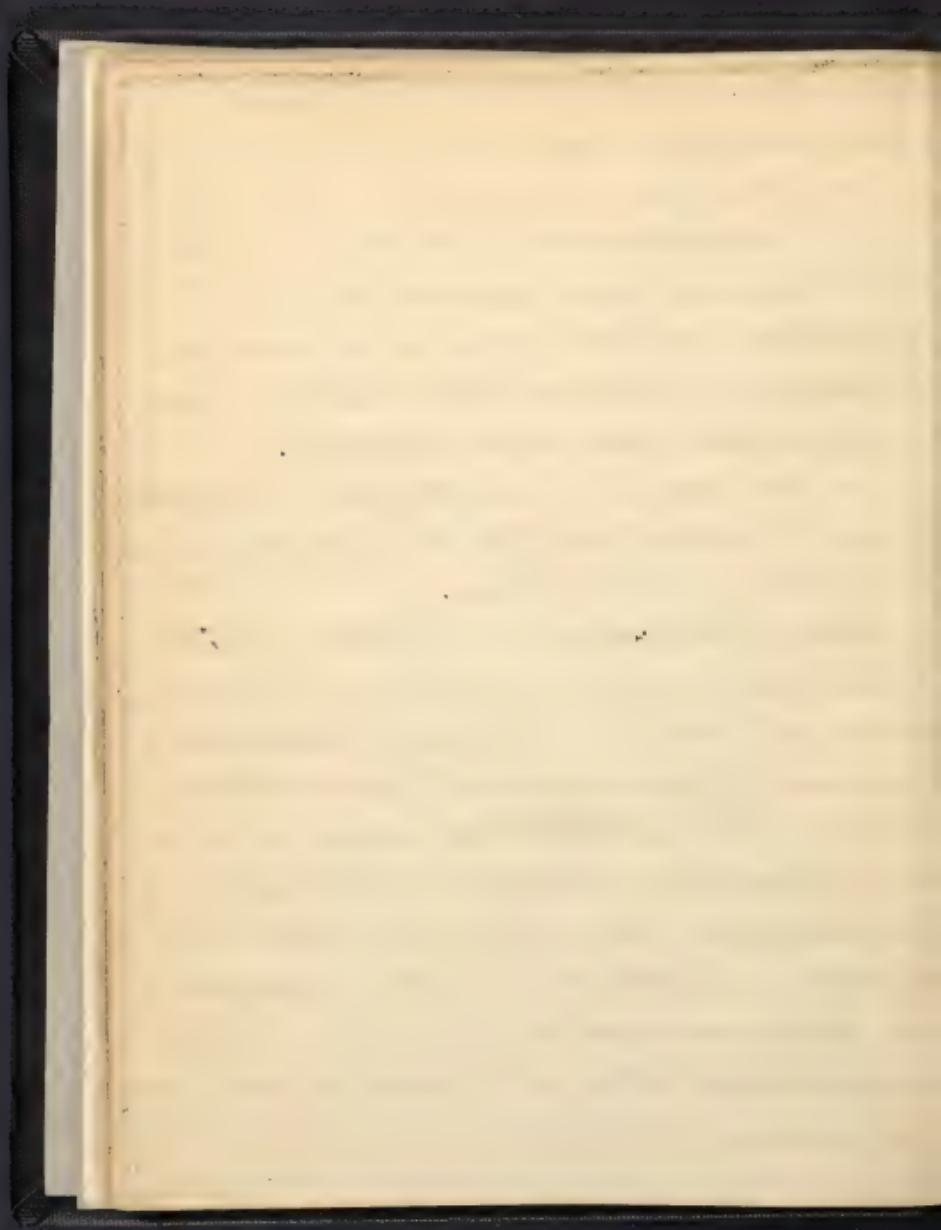
I shall first notice the local causes, but



produce debility in the uterus, by acting directly  
on it. There appear to be injuries done to the  
part, by very difficult or protracted labour;  
hasty treatment of the accouchement during  
separation; violence often in extracting the  
placenta, and pressure on the uterus, by bands  
or stays too tight to the abdomen.

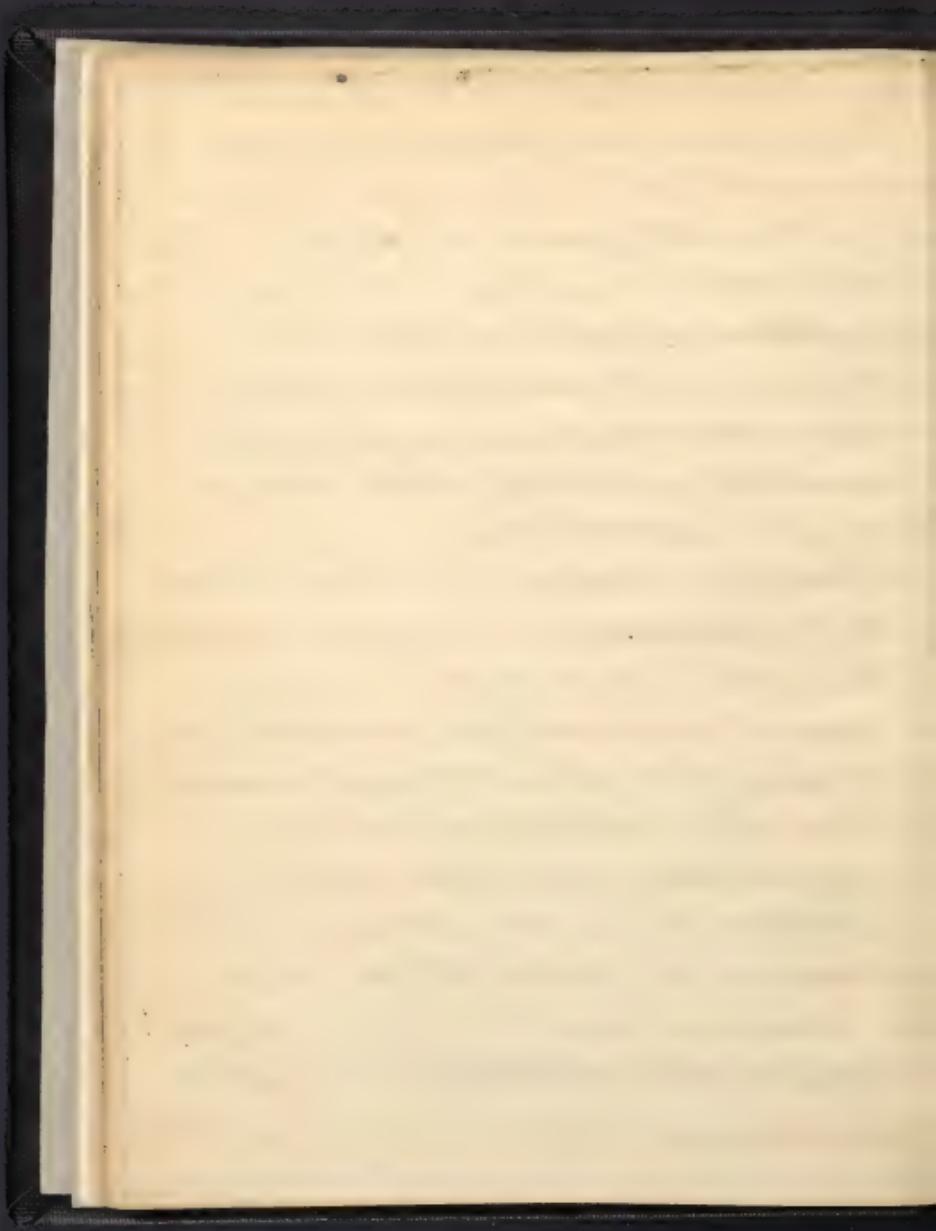
I now proceed to mention the causes that  
appear to produce debility through the medium  
of the general system.

Many of the modes and customs of civil-  
ized society may be considered as causes pro-  
ducing this disease. Improper fashions, such  
as wearing tight corsets; and apparel too  
tight for the <sup>changes</sup> in the atmosphere; chronic  
diseases, stimulating drinks, confined air, heat  
from too great quantity of Lee clothes, or  
epidemic constitution of the atmosphere,  
may all be considered as causes producing  
feeblefaction through the medium of the system.



shorter when the predisposition exists in the system generally, as in the uterus locally, among of the exciting causes act upon it they produce morbid or irregular action in the sanguiferous system; and this irregular action falls with greater force on the uterus and surrounding parts, on account of the accumulated excitability which exists in them after parturition.

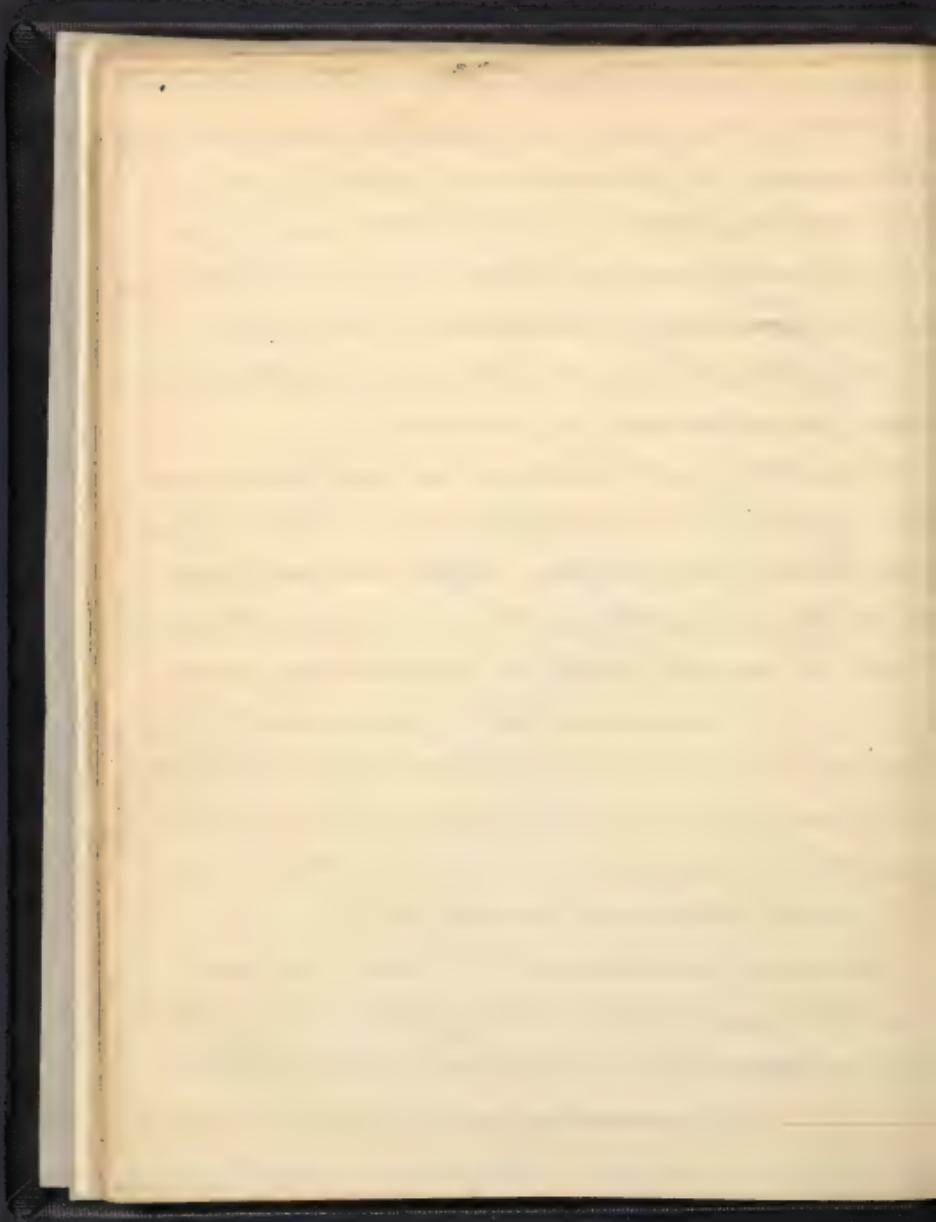
Exciting Causes. The causes which excite this disease, are not such stimuli as act on the system when predisposed to disease; in many of the causes before mentioned as remote, may prove the exciting cause. Some of the causes before noticed may account for it, always attacking the patient directly; after parturition when the system has been weakened and its excitability increased; hence when any stimulus is applied disproportioned to the excitability in the system,



it proves the cause of morbid action, which is  
determined to the uterus by finding there  
the weakest part in the body, and it is  
this local predisposition, which invites ir-  
regular ~~and~~<sup>or</sup> morbid excitement; as certainly,  
to use the words of Dr Russ, as the electric  
fluid is attracted by the rod.

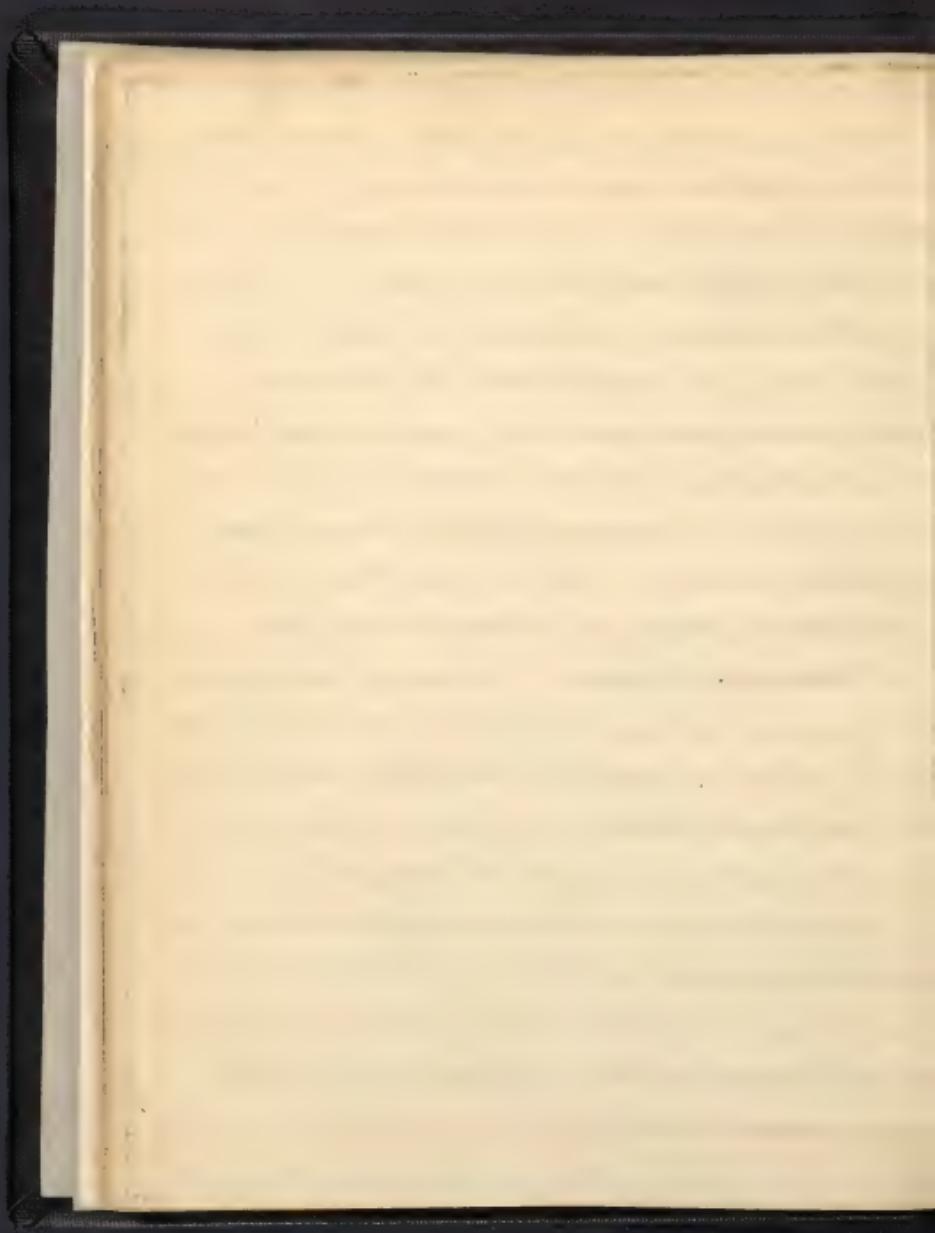
Admitting the uterus, as before men-  
tioned to be <sup>the</sup> weakest part in the body;  
authorises my saying that the disease is  
seated in the uterus; for we are well aware  
that when the body is labouring under  
disease, it is so very liable to disorder that  
weaker stimuli may sometimes produce disease;  
and if any part has a greater degree of force  
than another, it is this part the disease  
will first attack and show itself.

Viewing the body in this state, when the  
smallest impression takes effect, we may easily  
conceive the influence that heat from



too great quantity of beer, either stimulating  
drinkers, prepare on the uterus by bandages  
applied too tight to the abdomen and ob-  
structed ~~ex~~<sup>or</sup> perspiration, may have in produc-  
ing this disease; which is violent and  
fatal only in proportion to the remote  
predisposing and exciting causes; and with-  
out the last no disease can be produced,  
for they are the cause of the morbid and  
irregular action which produces the  
proximate cause of puerperal fever.

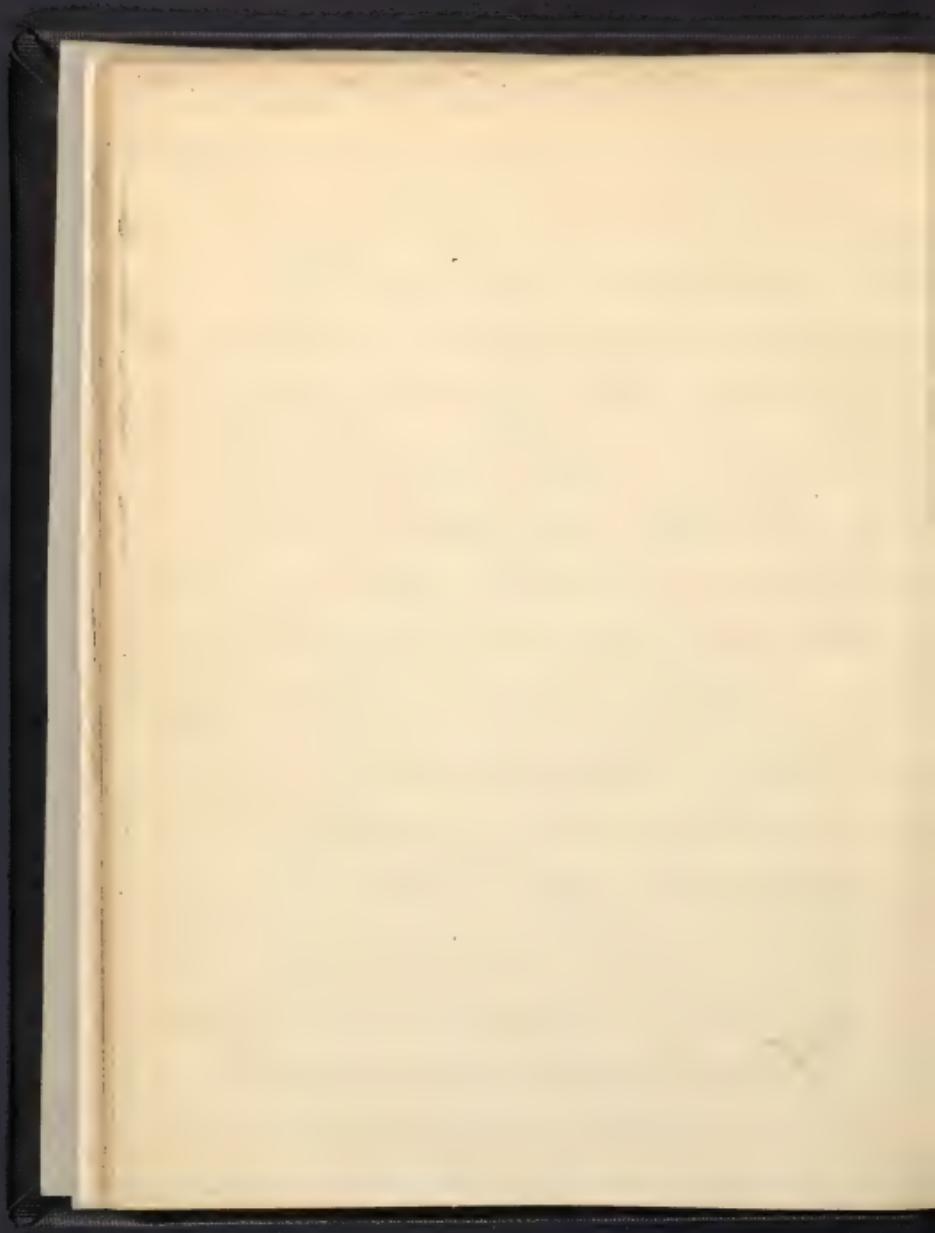
Proximate Cause. The <sup>the</sup> cause of disease depends  
very much on a knowledge of the proximate causes;  
but in this we recollect how fatal this disease  
is to puerperal women, it is not surprising, that  
it should give occasion to attempt to discover  
its proximate cause; we accordingly find various  
opinions advanced on this subject. But in this  
disease as in many others the effect was more  
considered than the cause. We therefore find the



junction of the cochlea impeded secretion & with  
a simple inflammation of the uterus, a pus-like  
mucum would have been considered as the cause.

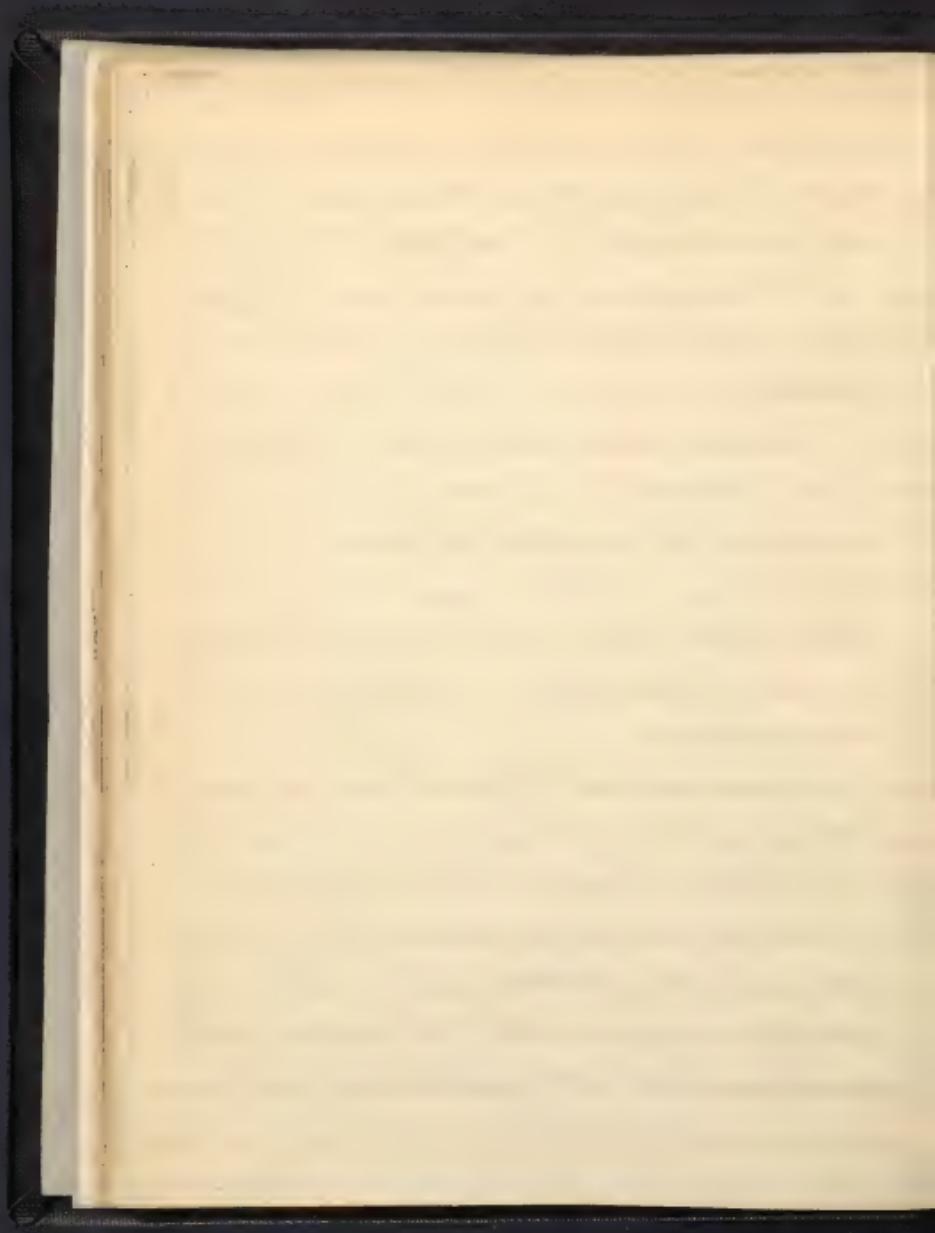
But a suppuration of the cochlea is not the  
cause, may be inferred, from its sometimes con-  
tinuous course; the whole course of the funnel of  
a natural osseous ear appendage. It may also  
be inferred that an excretive secretion of the  
uterus is not the cause, from the disease frequently  
attacking the patient before she will be  
able to conceive to the trouble, or if it has no  
visible history, has taken place in the appendage.

It has been supposed that an inflammation  
of the uterus or rectovaginum is the cause by the  
most expert practitioners with their friends;  
but it may more easily be admitted as the  
first in case we consider action of the  
impure venous system determines to the result  
of liability. I therefore consider carbuncle as the  
simple cause of the disease, in an aged &



marked action of the arterial system but especially  
is marks of being seated in the uterus by lessening  
thus the greatest source of debility. The appear-  
ances in the neighbourhood, first, are the effect  
of sympathy from the contiguity of situation.  
Why debility in a part should make it more  
vulnerable to disease when the whole system is  
under the influence of increased arterial action  
will not appear difficult to explain. When a  
part is affected in the sanguiferous vessels  
very much excited, that part being unable to bear  
the impetus of the blood, is certainly most  
vulnerable to disease.

Appearances on digestion. on diges-  
tion the marked appearance are principally  
visible to the abdomen; but sometimes the  
thorax exhibits marks of disease. On examining  
the abdomen you sometime find a quantity  
~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> turbulent or seious matter. The uterus and  
appendages, with the ovarium are, occa-



lure exhibit inflammatory qualities, &  
hinder and impede other healthy works of disease;  
sometimes these parts are mortified. These appear-  
ances are sufficient proofs of its malignant  
nature, and its being seated generally in  
these parts.

Cure. Having concluded the history and  
views with the arguments on affection,  
I now proceed to the curative part of my  
subject.

In a disease so violent in its attack,  
so rapid in its course, and generally so fatal in  
its termination; every exertion should be  
made as early after the attack as possible  
to prevent its progress.

The variety of views derived by various  
physicians among physicians concerning  
the cause and nature, have excited also regret,  
in the varieties to be employed in the cure  
of this disease.

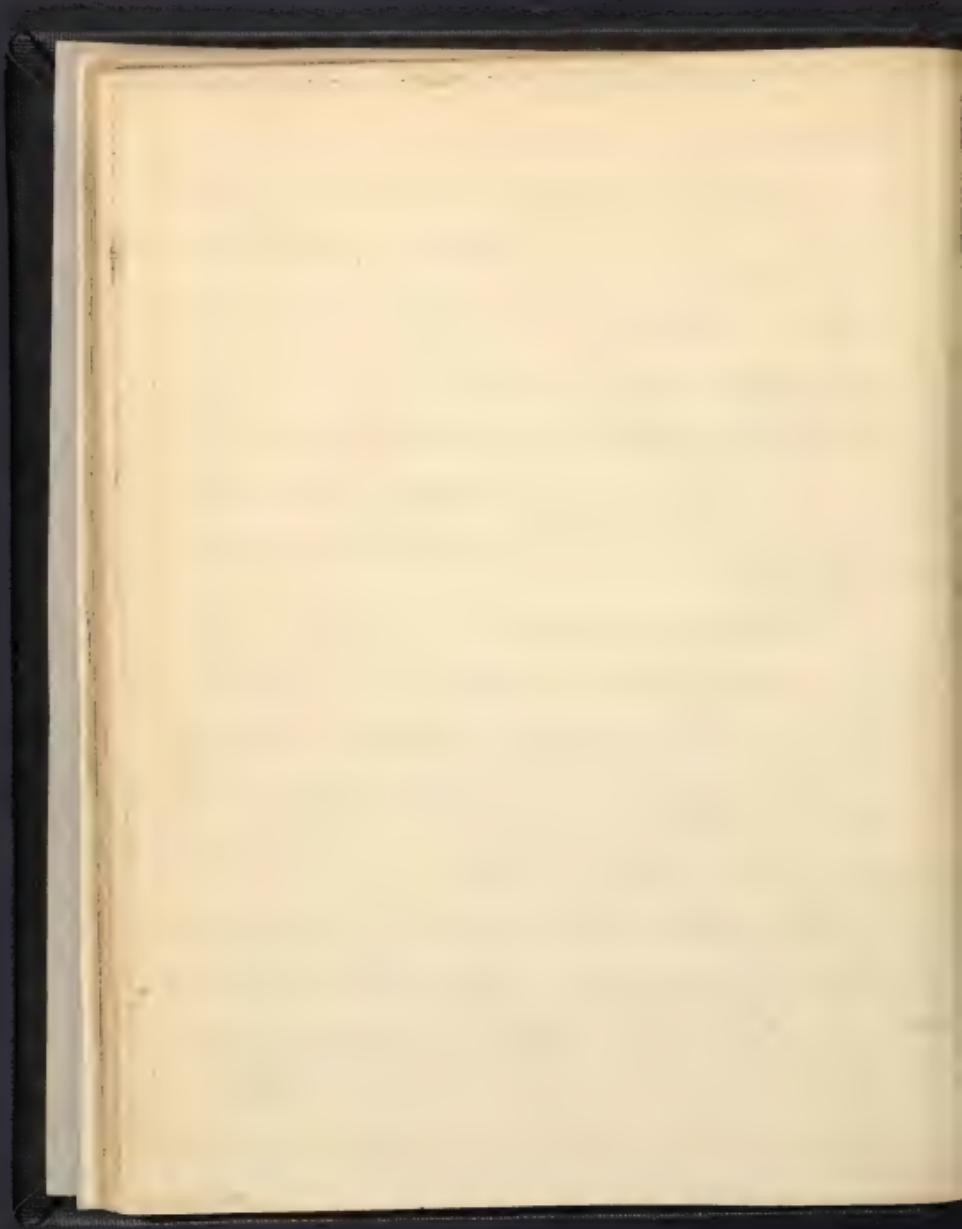


No we want a diversity of opinion, it will  
be best to pursue a variety of treatment  
which the state of the system or existing  
circumstances seem most to indicate.

As it was noticed before that this disease  
changes frequently from the inflammatory  
to the tertious state, the remedies to be im-  
ployed for the cure of it, must be divided  
into classes suited to these opposite states of  
the system.

The remedies for the inflammatory  
state of this fever, are all such as by their  
operation on the system, diminish the ex-  
cessive action of the blood vessels; in such  
as prevent local congestion and serious  
obstructions in vital parts.

The first and most important  
of these remedies that I shall men-  
tion, is blood-letting. The practice of  
blood-letting in this fever has a miliee-



of much disease, many maladies were very  
much beyond its power, every white feather  
had much recommended its adoption.

Dr. Johnson recommends copious bleed-  
ing at the commencement of the disease.

Dr. Gordon sees much in its favour  
in a very interesting account of his, one  
that passed at Aberdeen, in which  
we are informed that the disease was in-  
fected, in commencing its attack with  
violent and committting pain in the  
abdomen, with a very frequent pulse  
after this in a minute. He states that if  
he was called to see the patient within 4  
hours after the attack he always took  
away 20 sunders at 100, which was always  
sufficient to give him information that he  
was done with it in effecting a cure if he ever  
permitted to pursue this plan of treatment.

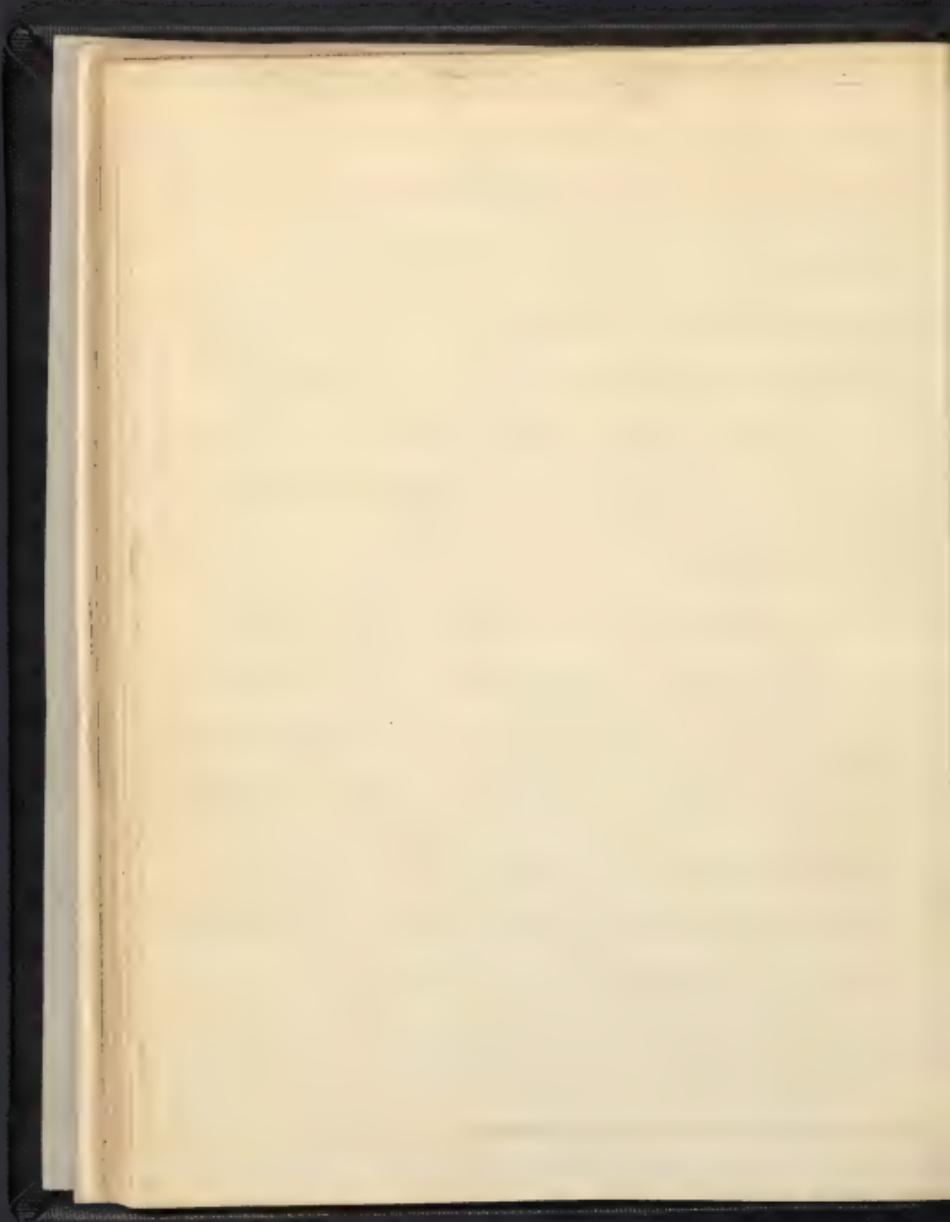
Dr. Chapman who informs us that the

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remedies which success<sup>d</sup> best in his hands, were  
bleeding freely, purging actively, and blistering  
the abdominal region.

The propriety of bloodletting in this  
disease is established beyond controversy  
by the sayings of many eminent practitioners  
in medicine; and when we are summary instances  
rarely of its inefficacy, we may collect it  
to be an improper use of the remedy as to him  
as to you.

To lay down plain rules as against the  
time it should be employed, and the quantity  
to be drawn would easily lead to misgivings.  
practitioners will thereby produce much mis-  
chief; but if you will take my advice,  
our physicians have advised, and with our  
soundest unanimous, I shall be content with this  
employment when defusion or tension in the  
skin, or the inflammatory action of the  
blood-vessel requires it, and the quantity to be



be taken must be regulated by the continuance  
or removal of those signs which call for the  
removal by its beneficial effects on the spleen.

Bleeding if properly used in disorders  
is one of the most efficacious remedies. Only  
injudiciously employed it is injurious and  
has injurious effects.

Constipation are the next remedy that can  
excite our attention, respecting them there has  
been as much diversity of opinion as ~~opposition~~  
about bleeding. Some physicians according  
the common course of the disease, are per-  
petually bleeding with a lancet, and in those  
considering it a very dangerous symptom  
are very much afraid their practice  
will do harm. While others considering it a favorab-  
le symptom recommend the use of pur-  
gative medicine. But purgatives measured  
in this disease will certainly be ineffectual when  
we recollect how injurious constipation is

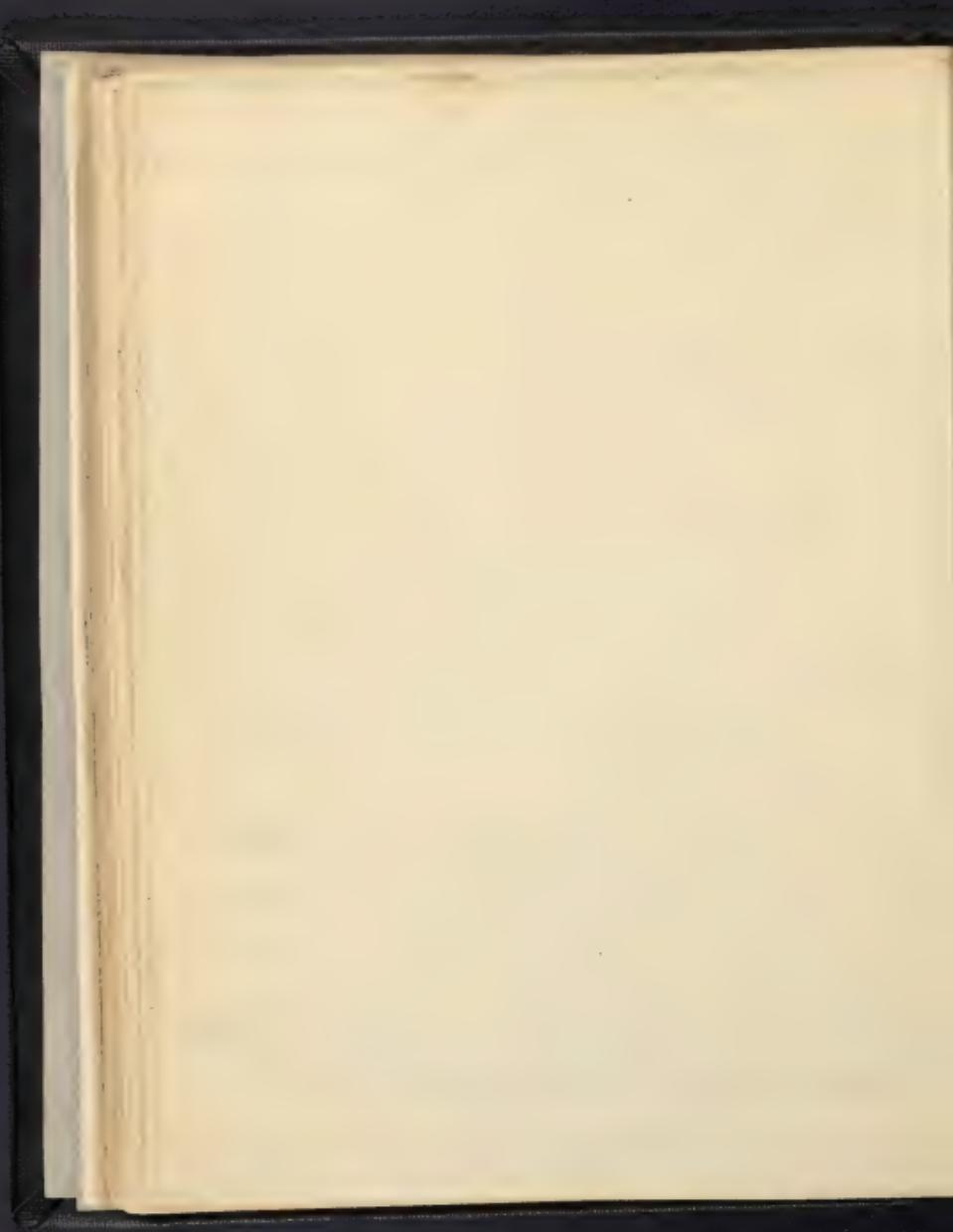


to rise early in our th, or his, and immediately tea w<sup>t</sup> rich with some.

By exhibiting cooling, laxatives and violent cathartics are keeping the bowels t, on & then, we frequent the accommodation of such matter as thus prevents the consequence of a spontaneous diarrhoea, which sometimes prevails in this disease without being useful, but often injurious. These mild medicines should be discontinued as the more, every time purgatives which I exhibited might produce a too copious discharge, or diarrhoea and thereby hasten the natural death.

In the next place & next we take Emetics. Some physicians have tried & advised, to them for the cure of, reconvalescent fever.

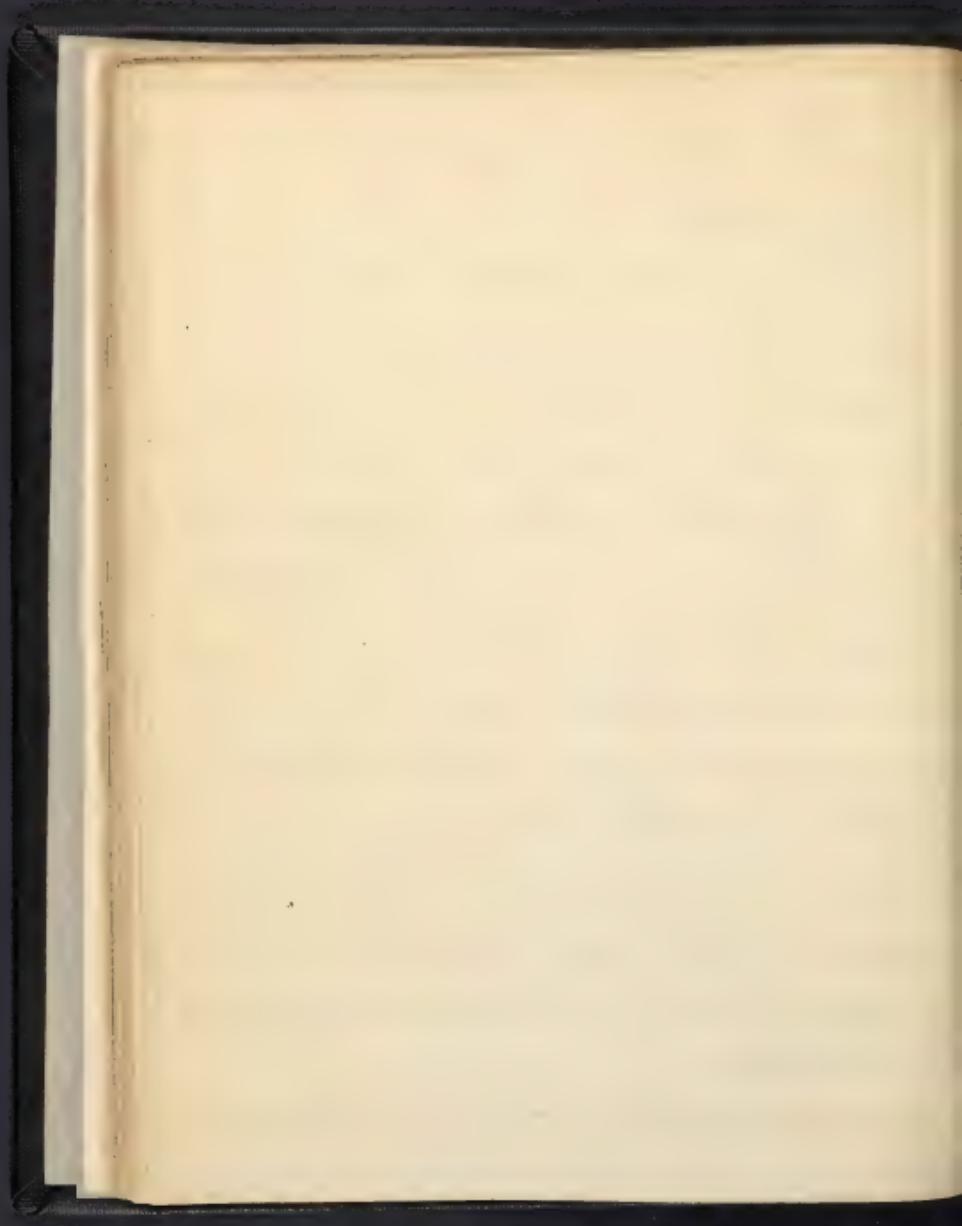
Mr. W. Scott of the Fleet Street Club who was one of their number was some



relied entirely on opacousness, made it his practice to exhibit an emetic immediately after the attack and often repeat it.

Emetics if sincerely employed may be considered as a very valuable remedy in this disease, but he depends on them entirely would be very injurious; as those who are most liable for a cure will be most likely to consider themselves very much disposed to incur in their expectation. When they are given as auxiliaries to other remedies great advantage may be expected from them.

The milder emetics may be exhibited with advantage to remove the stonks of any offensive matter it may contain; besides their operation often opens the pores of the bowels, or determining the serum of the blood through the pores, and thus equalize the excretion of the animal, by inviting its excretive secretions, and the blood vessels to the stomach are ministered.



and it commences action & it will  
not stop unless by considerable exertions and  
not till it is over it is reduced, as you are  
fond of seeing injuries in the right  
action.

They may, however, be used with  
great advantage in small doses to help to draw  
out the humor to the surface of the body and  
by those means remove internal congestion and  
promote the action of the blood vessels.

Blisters are the fourth in act nearly  
that I shall mention. For the inflammatory  
stage of febrile fever. They are very much in  
use, mostly in many diseases, and may be con-  
sidered very efficacious in this disease, if their  
application be regulated by caution; occa-  
sionally; if the inflammatory symptoms of the  
disease, are violent they should be before  
the application of blisters. If this  
precaution be taken, blisters are of great

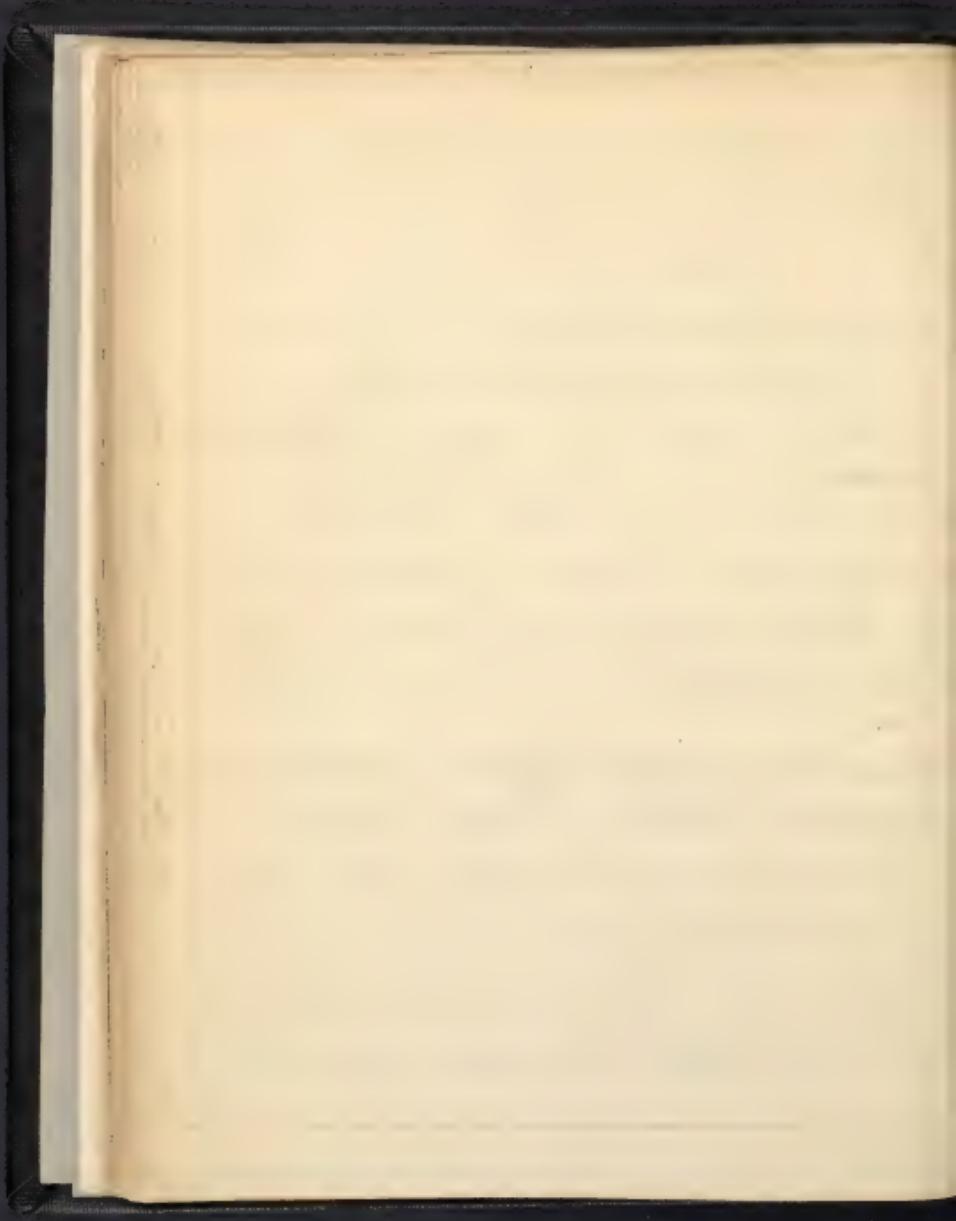


service in elevating, & in all distended regions.

Blister may also afford great service by inducing an artificial inflammation on the surface of the skin that will draw the humor from injured or inflamed parts and by such means cure or remove of visual congestion.

Blister may also be employed with great advantage in the treatment of diseases in which the effusion late, in the violent convulsions, & so far as it does, does so in a greater degree of elevation. Blister will be found useful here, especially when applied to the abdomen and rectum.

Remedies for the Suppurative State of  
Stomach. <sup>For</sup> When the body becomes  
so grossly torpid, which may be however in  
a short space of time such as ten  
or twelve hours, as in violent action in the  
stomach, vessels, brain, nerves, muscles &c.  
and especially the excitement of the rectum.

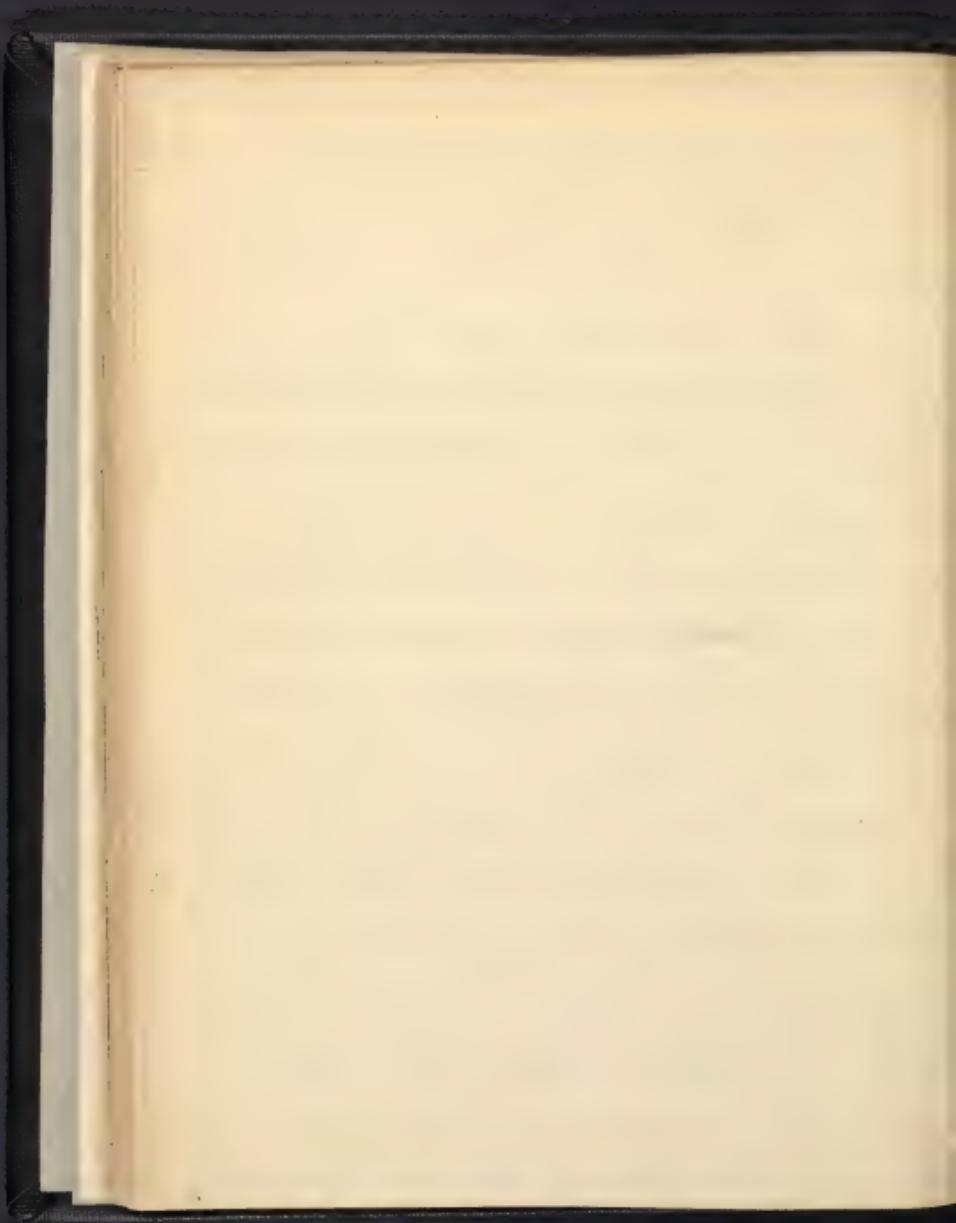


sistem are; by inducing it into a violent  
and morbid action in the vessels of the in-  
terior, to them more vigorous and healthy  
action?

The remedies for producing the effect  
on the system are stimulants. Stimulants  
are now are divided into internal and external.

The internal stimulants are opium,  
risalin, or common liquor, aloe, sanguineum bark,  
virginia snake root, camphor  
and many others, but those enumerated if  
properly excited, are alternately employed  
will be sufficient to cure the disease.

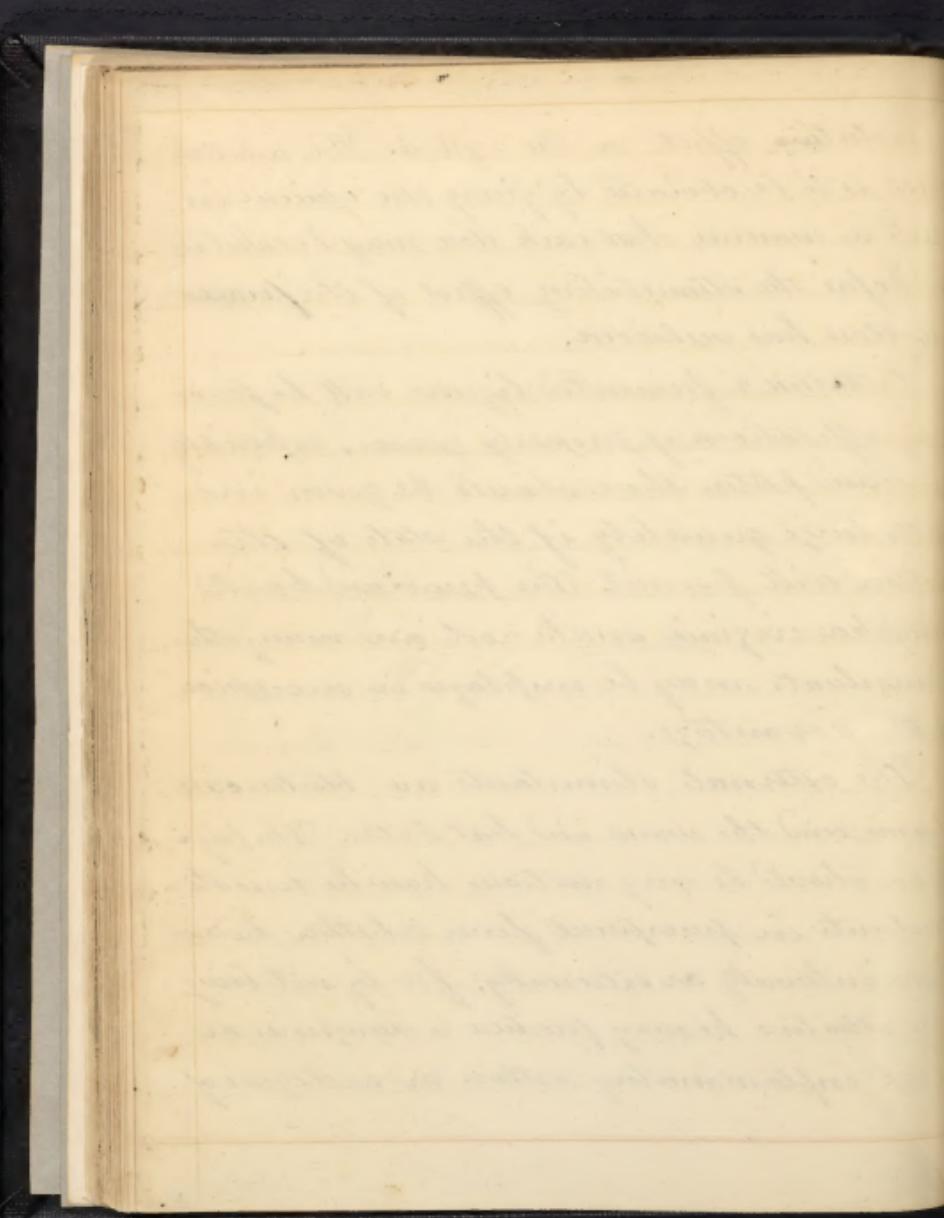
Opium will be found one of the most  
efficacious remedies in the treatment of  
the lower of property, vesicles. Its  
proper exhibition requires the physician  
to be very attentive to the pulse to prevent  
its elevating the system into inflammatory  
action, or to prevent the opium exciting



a sedative effect on the system. This sedative effect is to be obviated by giving the opium in such a manner that each dose may be exhibited before the stimulating effect of the preceding dose has subsided.

Distilled & fermented liquors will be found very efficacious if properly given; especially wine and porter there should be given in pretty large quantity if the state of the system will permit. The peruvian bark, camphor, virginia snake root, and many other stimulants may be employed in succession with advantage.

The external stimulants are blisters, cataplasms, and the warm and hot baths. The physician should be very cautious how he uses stimulants in purpural fever whether he uses them internally or externally; for by not being very attentive he may produce a dangerous or fatal inflammatory action on a degree of



pneumonia from which the system cannot be raised.

The method most proper of giving stimulants will be to begin <sup>with</sup> the mildest of them, and be regulated by existing circumstances.

But I may safely say that those medicines which have been enumerated, when employed by a practitioner acquainted with his art and attentive to his patient, may be employed with the greatest prospect of affording relief to suffering humanity.

